

## TRAUMA BONDING

On average a woman will leave an abusive partner seven times before she leaves him for good. Most of these women are aware that they need to keep well away from their partner – but still they are either, drawn back or easily lured back. Invariably, each time they return they bitterly regret it and end up leaving again, only for the cycle to repeat. So what is it that is going on to cause this to happen? Not all of the women who suffer abuse can be “needy” or “stupid”, “lacking in willpower” or any of the other slurs commonly levelled at them by those ignorant about the dynamics of abuse.

The truth is that research shows that leaving an abusive partner can be as difficult as becoming unhooked from alcohol or drugs. The reason being that the hot/cold, push/pull, nice/nasty behaviour of a controlling partner can trigger a bio-chemical reaction in the brain that quite literally sets up an addiction (demand/reward) loop in the partner.

The cocktail of hormones that are released in the early days of a heady romance, swiftly followed by the further rush of neurochemicals when the relationship becomes sexual, is normal. It is the way that two human beings form a bond. However the normal bonding can become what’s known as a *trauma bond* when it is accompanied by the sudden rise and fall of adrenaline and other fight or flight stress hormones.

This occurs when fear kicks in if a partner threatens your safety with either physical violence or other psychological and emotional forms of fear, such as fear of humiliation, or fear of loss/abandonment, fear of poverty etc.

When this is followed by the reintroduction of more feel-good hormones such as oxytocin (dubbed ‘the love drug’) when the partner returns to your side or starts calling again, it is like ‘getting your fix’. It is a potent mix.

It’s also a recipe for disaster.

The abusive partner might have withdrawn from your life or been cruel or violent, or perhaps critical and disparaging, but now they are whispering sweet-nothings again, texting you and calling and telling you that you are the best thing that ever happened to them. Perhaps you somehow find yourself consenting to passionate ‘make-up’ sex. One minute you hate them, the next you love them and the next you just don’t know what is going on. Instead of directing your anger at them, you may begin to feel self-loathing for feeling so addicted to someone who your rational mind (and often everyone else) can see is no good for you.

When people say that abusive partners play with your mind and toy with your emotions, they literally mean it. Never underestimate the level of manipulation a controlling partner will try and exert.

This pattern of intermittent reinforcement is dangerous to one’s equilibrium and if it is also accompanied by recreational drug or alcohol use, or even the use of anti-depression

medication or other prescription drugs, it can be even more devastating and destabilising to one's biochemistry.

What's more, with or without additional substances such as alcohol or drugs contributing to the hormonal mayhem, the length of the relationship between a woman and her partner, does not matter – rather it is the intensity of the interaction that has occurred.

This factor can be seen from research into a phenomenon known as the *Stockholm Syndrome*, where a hostage becomes trauma bonded to their captor despite this being a stranger AND a person who poses a threat to their safety.

The FBI's Crisis Negotiation Unit concluded that the amount of time that passes proves less important than other factors, including the emotional intensity of the incident and the victims' feelings of loss of control and perceived fear for their lives. - Stockholm Syndrome

There are plenty of scholarly articles about Trauma Bonding and Stockholm Syndrome online – and some of them are included at the end of this page and in the articles section on the Resources page. All we really need to understand here though is not the mechanics of how it happens, or what the precise names of the neurotransmitters triggered are, but the fact that - like an addict going cold turkey - leaving an abusive partner, walking away and not ever returning is rarely ever going to work without some support.

If you are leaving or have left an abusive relationship, you should seek professional support and also try and educate yourself as to what physiological changes you are likely to encounter with each stage of your withdrawal from your partner. That way you will realise that your feelings actually have very little to do with love and affection per se, but everything to do with how deeply psychologically and physiologically entangled you became with your partner.

Interestingly, during 'withdrawal' you might find your reactions follow a very similar pattern to the Kubler-Ross change curve - also known as the cycle of grief, which we see in a physical bereavement. You can see this change curve below:

# Seven Stages of Change

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross Model



Between the stages of shock and acceptance lies the period where a woman is likely to feel that any contact with her abuser is better than the 'death' of self that she irrationally feels is occurring. The intensity of grief a person can feel when they realise that their partner is not someone they can co-exist with safely (and indeed not the person they thought they were at all) is a loss that can take considerable time to adjust to.

Gaining an understanding about trauma bonding makes it so much easier to understand why we see couples and say 'what on Earth does she see in him?' 'Why does she stay?' It also explains how someone who was not initially attracted to a partner can switch to being totally 'captivated' by them in a very short space of time.

In combination with the threats and the rise and fall of biochemical reactions that accompany these episodes, it becomes far easier to understand how this process of becoming 'captivated' works and to look at it more dispassionately – and to treat yourself more kindly.

To read more about Trauma Bonding and about the Stockholm Syndrome facet of why we stay with abusive partners, please see the following list and visit the resources page.

It may interest you to know that in my early life I worked as Flight Attendant. Part of our training was to learn all about the Stockholm Syndrome in case we ever got into a hijack/hostage situation. I never expected that decades later I would become hostage to the

manipulations of an abusive partner. All this is to say I write this now as an expert by experience.

Here's some fascinating reading.

[Stockholm Syndrome - Wiki](#)

[Trauma Bonding](#)

[Trauma Bonding and Intimate Partner Violence](#)

[Trauma Bonding and Betrayal Bonds](#)